Christ Among Us



An Advent journey into peace, joy and love

Anglican Diocese of Waiapu

Advent 2026

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You may like to begin each study with this:

A Song of Praise for Advent: The Desert shall Blossom

1 The desert shall rejoice and blossom;
it shall rejoice with gladness and singing.
2 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed:
and the majesty of our God.
3 Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened:
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
4 then shall the lame leap like the hart:
and the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy.
5† For waters shall break forth in the wilderness:
and streams in the desert.
6 The ransomed of the Lord shall return:
and come with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads.
7 They shall obtain joy and gladness:
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35:1, 2, 5, 6,10
Glory to the Father and to the Son: and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now: and shall be for ever. Amen.

My hope is that through these reflections you may greet Christmas Day with a new sense of the love God has for you and for all the world.

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Welcome

Welcome to this study

This study's designed for two different contexts: groups meeting in parishes or other ministry units (for example, schools or workplaces), or people on their own to do at home. You might want to do it as a family. It's a way of helping us reflect on this season and what it means to prepare for the coming of Christ.

Welcome to Advent



The word Advent means "coming" or "'arrival." In this season we get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Coming, and we anticipate the return of Christ the King in his Second Coming. So we're looking forward as well as looking back.

Advent runs from the 4th Sunday before Christmas (Advent 1 – the beginning of the Church's year) to the Sunday immediately prior to Christmas (Advent 4) and on to Christmas Day.

Love (Aroha), Peace (Rongo) and Joy (Hari) in the Holy Spirit are the values embedded in our Waiapu Strategic Vision. They are values that lead to flourishing, to that abundant life which Jesus came to give us (John 10:10). We're called to work for human flourishing and the flourishing of all creation – Te Oranga Ake o te Iwi, o Te Ao. We seek a world in which everyone can find a life worthy of our humanity, worthy of beings created in the image and likeness of God, and we work for the flourishing of the whole created order, because our humanity is tied to the health of the earth and the dignity of all people.

The values we celebrate here dovetail with the traditional themes for each Sunday of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love. These are the ideas that will guide us to Christmas and beyond.

- ***How do we want to be different – more peaceful, more joyful, more loving – as we welcome Christ amongst us?***

1 Peace – Rongo



Image: Zaur Ibrahimov, Unsplash

Peace is more than simply an absence of conflict; it's a quality of life lived as it should be – indeed, as it was designed to be – between different nations, between individuals, and also within ourselves. Peace is God's gift to us, a blessing for God's people.

It's what God wills for all creation, and what God acts to give us. The Psalmist asks, "May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" (Ps 29:11) and that's a request we might all make. At a difficult time in Israel's history the prophet Isaiah prays on behalf of his people: "O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us." (Isaiah 26:12) That's an expression of trust, grounded in their relationship with this God who had been acting on their behalf for generation after generation. It's human beings acknowledging that even when we think we're doing something on our own, actually God is there with us.

- ***What has God done for you (as an individual)? What has God done for us (in our community)? And how might that lead to peace?***
- ***How does acknowledging what God has done for us change things?***

One of the ways peace comes to our inner being is through trust in God. Isaiah again: "Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace, in peace because they trust in you." (Isaiah 26:3) It's a thought picked up by the Desert Mothers and Fathers, who portrayed inner peace as flowing from surrender to God. Abba Poemen said: "Do not give your

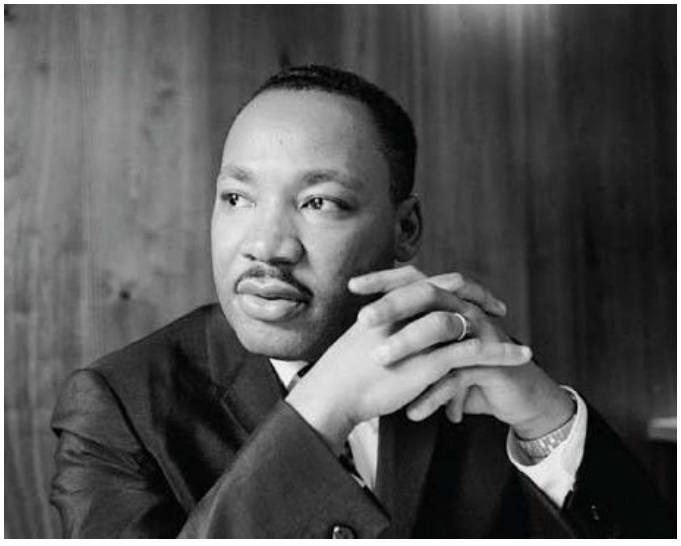
heart to that which does not satisfy your heart." – This is an antidote to the restless pursuit of so many things: all our *stuff,* as well as FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out).

- ***Peace as absence of worry/anxiety, or peace as contentment: which is most needed today? Which do you most need?***

In the Bible, Peace – *shalom* – is about wholeness, wellbeing, and right relationship. Isaiah looks ahead to when a spirit from on high will be poured out on the people, piling up images of goodness: justice, righteousness, peace, quietness, and trust:

> Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
> and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
> The effect of righteousness will be peace,
> and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever.
> My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
> in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.
>
> Isaiah 32:16-18

This is what well-being and human flourishing looks like. In this passage (and it's something we find consistently in Scripture) the link between peace and justice is clear. Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) criticised those who prefer "a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." True peace requires justice – anything less is illusory. King contrasted "an obnoxious negative peace" in which those who are oppressed passively accept their unjust plight, with "a substantive and positive peace, in which all [people] will respect the dignity and worth of human personality."



- ***Have you ever known (maybe in a meeting or a community you've been part of) that kind of false peace which is merely an absence of conflict, masking underlying tensions or a fear of expressing a contrary idea?***
- ***How do we get past that to a real, positive, peace characterised by justice and mutual respect?***

The Prince of Peace

One of the readings we hear often in Advent comes from Isaiah:



Image: Jill Sauve, Unsplash

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Great will be his authority,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

In its original context this was probably an oracle for a king's accession or re-enthronement ceremony; we see it and think of Jesus, born as a child in Bethlehem, come to bring peace to the earth. The multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (Luke 2:14) captures the same thought: the coming of Jesus into our world was to bring peace. It's an idea that finds its way into many well-loved Christmas carols, from "Silent Night" to "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The Christmas Truce

On Christmas Eve 1914, British and German soldiers in opposing trenches began exchanging greetings after hearing each other singing carols and seeing Christmas decorations. Messages began to be shouted between the trenches. On Christmas Day, many met in No-Man's Land, where they shared gifts, took photographs, played football, buried their dead, and repaired trenches. Sadly the unofficial truce gradually faded after Boxing Day, and the soldiers returned to the war.



Statue in the garden of St. Luke's Church on Berry Street in Liverpool, depicting one of the moments during the unofficial Christmas Truce of 1914.

- ***In what ways might the coming of Jesus as the Prince of Peace happen today? What might this peace look like in our world?***

Christ is our peace

Jesus came to bring peace to our hearts, and to our homes and our communities, and he also came to bring peace between us and God. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection put right the rift between humanity and God caused by sin. This is where we remember that *shalom* is about right relationship – not only between human beings but

between human beings and God. We find this theme in several of the New Testament letters and in Mark's account of the crucifixion, where, at the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Here, the tearing of the Temple curtain that separated the Holy of Holies (the most sacred part of the Temple) from the rest of the sanctuary is usually understood symbolising how, through the death of Jesus, the barrier between God and humanity has been removed. Mark's note that it was torn "from top to bottom" suggests that this is God's action, not a human one.



Image: Alicia Quan, Unsplash

- Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

- Through Christ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through the blood of his cross." (Colossians 1:20)

❖ ***What does peace with God feel like for you?***

Peace between peoples

Christ is our peace, not only reconciling humanity to God but also to one another. A particular theme in Paul's letters and in the Pauline tradition is the new peace established between Jews and Gentiles through Christ. Christ has made both groups into one and broken down the previous hostility, so that there is now "no longer Jew or Greek" but one people in Christ (Galatians 3:28; see also Romans 10:12; Colossians 3:11). Similarly the story of Peter's encounter with the Gentile Cornelius leads to his realisation: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." (Acts 10:34-35)

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Ephesians 2:13-16)



Christ brings reconciliation between those who have been divided. We see this in the story of Tarore, whose father responded to her murder not with utu but with forgiveness inspired by the Gospel of Luke. We see it in the witness of Te Manihera and Kereopa, who carried the gospel of peace even at great personal cost. We see it in the long and difficult work of reconciliation that followed tragedies such as the death of Völkner. In each case, Christ's peace challenged the logic of revenge and opened the possibility of a new future.

- ***What other examples can you think of where Christ has made possible peace between different groups of people?***

The Church is called to practise peace in our common life within the Christian community and as we live alongside our neighbours.

- If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18)
- Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Romans 14:19)

This doesn't mean we all have to think the same, nor should we try to enforce that pseudo-peace which masks underlying tensions, but it does mean we consider others' needs as well as our own.

- ***How can we make space for honest differences while remaining committed to one another in Christ?***

- ***What does peace look like in a church community, and what is that saying to those around it?***

St Augustine traces peace from the individual to the whole of creation: the peace of the body, the peace of the soul, the harmony of body and soul, peace with God, peace with one another, peace in the household, peace in the city, and finally the peace of the heavenly city itself.

- ***Which of those kinds of peace do you most want – for yourself, or for your community?***

To finish – some prayers:

O God of many names,
lover of all peoples;
we pray for peace
in our hearts and homes,
in our nations and our world;
the peace of your will,
the peace of our need.

Dear Christ, our friend and our guide,
pioneer through the shadow of death,
passing through darkness to make it light,
be our companion that we may fear no evil,
and bring us to life and to glory.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

2 Joy / Hari



Image: Mi Pham, Unsplash

Joy is much more than happiness. Happiness often depends on circumstances, on what is happening to us or to those we love. Biblical joy, on the other hand, is something rooted in God's character, in God's presence and in God's promises. It sustains flourishing, and is a powerful antidote to despair in difficult circumstances. The First Letter of Peter speaks of rejoicing, even while suffering various trials, and of believing in Christ and so rejoicing "with an indescribable and glorious joy." (1 Peter 1:6-8)

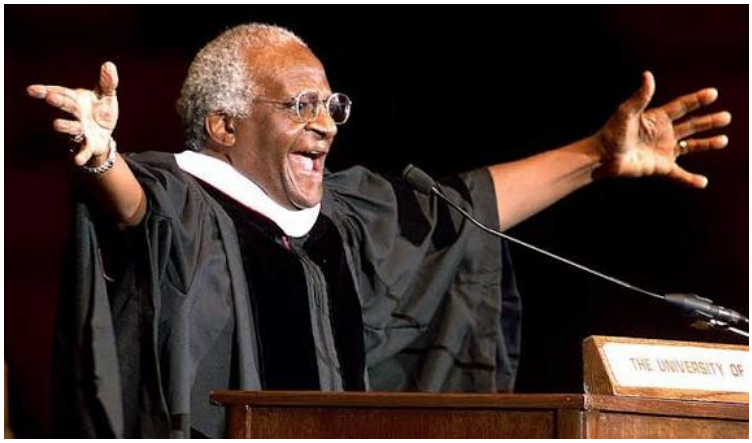
The prophet Habakkuk was active in a difficult time in Judah's history. He's concerned with human suffering, with violence and destruction, both current and future. And yet, says one commentator, it's a book "about a God whose will for humankind is that they have life and have it more abundantly."[1] His community is still coping with strife, the poor are suffering, an enemy is attacking, and yet:

> Though the fig tree does not blossom
> and no fruit is on the vines;
> though the produce of the olive fails
> and the fields yield no food;
> though the flock is cut off from the fold
> and there is no herd in the stalls,
> yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
> I will exult in the God of my salvation.
>
> (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

[1] Elizabeth Achtemier, *Nahum-Malachi* (Interpretation Commentary) 31-32.

- ***How do you react to this?***
- ***Do you think joy can coexist with grief or suffering?***

Archbishop Desmond Tutu frequently argued that joy can coexist with suffering and adversity. In *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World (2016)*, he and the Dalai Lama reflected on finding joy in the midst of oppression, grief, illness, and hardship. Tutu's perspective was shaped by his experiences during apartheid and by his work for reconciliation in South Africa.



Joy comes from God's presence

Joy isn't a matter of possessions – of all the stuff we have (or think we need); neither is it centred on success. When we look through the Bible or encounter the witness of figures from Church history we find joy often connected to relationship with God.

The early monks spoke frequently about inner joy emerging from prayer, self-knowledge, and trust in God. They, like the author of 1 Peter, understood that joy could exist with hardship and simplicity. One of the striking themes in their writings is that joy grows when the heart becomes free from anxiety, resentment, and self-preoccupation.

St Augustine saw joy as the proper end of human life because humanity is made for God. "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." For Augustine, true joy isn't found in possessions, success, or pleasure, but in the enjoyment of God. Earthly joys are good, but they are signs pointing beyond themselves.

- ***How do people commonly seek for happiness today?***
- ***What distinguishes joy from happiness?***

Fullness of joy in God's presence

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."
As for the holy ones in the land,
they are the noble ones
in whom is all my delight.
I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand,
I shall not be moved.

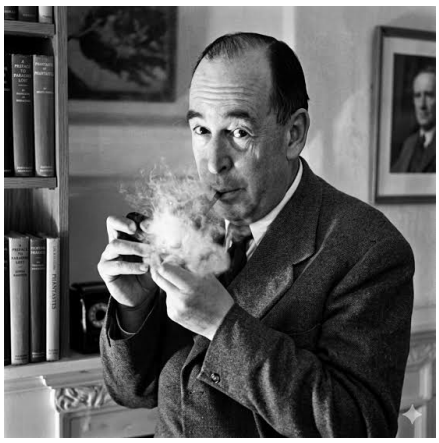


Image: Circling Sea, Unsplash

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps 16: 1-3,8-9,11)

- ***What prevents joy from flourishing in our lives?***
- ***How does prayer create space for joy?***

Surprised by Joy



The spiritual autobiography of author and scholar C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) was entitled *Surprised by Joy.* In it, Lewis distinguished between happiness and what he called "Joy," a profound longing awakened by beauty, love, goodness, and holiness. For Lewis, Joy is a signpost pointing beyond itself toward God.

- ***Have you ever experienced a moment that awakened a longing for something beyond yourself?***
- ***How might such experiences point toward God?***

The joy of salvation

Scripture often points us towards joy in God's saving work, God's work of healing, restoring, and renewing both people and creation through Christ. People don't rejoice simply because life is easy or because circumstances have improved. Rather, joy springs from recognising what God has done: rescuing, forgiving, healing, and drawing people into new life.

In Isaiah 12, the people rejoice because God has saved them. God has become their strength and salvation, and is present with them. "Drawing water from the wells of salvation" suggests a deep and ongoing source of life and refreshment, joy flowing from knowing that God has acted for the good of God's people and remains with them.



Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and will not be afraid,
for the Lord is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
And you will say on that day:
"Give thanks to the Lord; call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted."
(Isaiah 12:2-6)

Image: mrjn Photography, Unsplash

In Luke 15, Jesus presents three parables, stories which each feature the restoration of something that's been lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son (or maybe two lost sons). In each case, the response to finding what was lost is celebration. The stories reveal God's delight when people are restored to relationship with God. It's not just those who are found who rejoice – it's also God's joy and the joy of heaven.

- ***Where have you experienced God's restoring or renewing work in your own life?***
- ***Which image speaks most strongly to you: being found, being welcomed home, or drawing water from a well? Why?***
- ***How might sharing in God's joy over those who are restored change the way we view other people?***

Joy sustains the Christian community

Modern Western culture often treats joy as a private feeling, but in Scripture joy (like many things) is remarkably communal. God's people rejoice together in worship, in festivals, and in the experience of God's presence among them. Pilgrims go up to Jerusalem rejoicing (Psalm 122:1), and we see the early Christians devoting themselves to fellowship, sharing meals "with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). Even Paul's exhortation, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4), is addressed to a congregation, not merely to individuals.

Shared worship reminds us we're not alone. We remember together what God has done – that's how Israel's great festivals, and indeed our own Eucharist, were designed: not merely as acts of obedience but as celebrations of God's saving acts. Congregations grow in joy when they regularly tell stories of God's work, not only in Scripture and in church history, but in their own community.



Image: Mitch Botsford, Unsplash

- ***When have you experienced joy through the worship, encouragement, or faith of other Christians?***
- ***What practices in our congregation help people share both joy and sorrow?***
- ***Are we known more for anxiety and complaint, or for gratitude and hope?***

Christian joy looks toward God's future

In the Bible, joy's often linked with hope and the coming of God's kingdom. It's not just a response to present blessings but to future ones as well. Christians rejoice not only because of what God has done, but because of what God has promised to do. Hope, grounded in Christ's resurrection, gives believers confidence that suffering, injustice, sin, and death won't have the final word.

We see this joyful hope especially in the book of Revelation where heavenly worship celebrates God's reign. The vision of the new heaven and new earth offers perhaps the Bible's greatest picture of future joy and flourishing: God dwelling among humanity, tears wiped away, death abolished, and everything made new (Revelation 21:1-4).

- ***How does hope for God's future sustain joy now?***
- ***And how might that shape how we live in the present?***
- ***How can a congregation embody signs of God's promised future in its life together?***

Good news of great joy

In Advent we remember that we are waiting for the coming of Christ - as a baby in Betlehem (his first coming) and in triumph at the end of time (his second coming). That first coming was marked by joy, announced by angels to the shepherds.



Image: Teodora Popa, Unsplash

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this

day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (Luke 2:8-14

How might your community embody that joy this Christmas?

To finish – some prayers:

Eternal God,
light of the minds that know you,
joy of the hearts that love you,
strength of the wills that serve you;
grant us so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may gladly serve you,
now and always. **Amen.**

God of all delight,
grant us that joy
which none can take from us,
of having a work to do,
a life to live;
that joy in believing
which will carry us through.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

3 Love / Aroha



Image: Fadi Xd, Unsplash

Love is our foundational value – more than hope, peace, joy, or faith: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13) We are commanded to love – Jesus encapsulated the Old Testament law into two core commands – to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourself – which reminds us that we're also to love ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). This is the heart of Christian discipleship, of our following Jesus. But that's not where it starts. It starts with God.

God's love comes first

"In the beginning God" "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The biblical story begins not with humanity seeking God, but God seeking humanity. God didn't need to create anything, but created everything because God wanted to communicate Godself. Creation is an act of goodness reaching out beyond itself – and that means that behind all that exists is a deep-seated generosity, a profound love.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God says "I have loved you with an everlasting love." (Jeremiah 31:3) God's love – for humanity, and for creation as a whole – comes before everything else. And that means God's love comes before our response. Advent, the season for us to prepare for the coming of Christ, begins with God's initiative.

One of the best-known verses in the entire Bible is John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The Incarnation – God coming amongst us, taking human flesh as Jesus – flows from God's love for the world. Everything else – our welcoming of Jesus, our trying to live as children of God, our love for one another and for our planet – follows after that. Christmas – and also and especially Easter – stems from God's love.

- ***What does it mean that God's love comes before our response?***

Love becomes visible in Jesus

In Advent we celebrate that God's love isn't merely spoken but embodied in the incarnation: Christ is the tangible expression of God's love. No-one's ever seen God – but it's Jesus, God the only Son, who has made God known to us, revealing God's glory, grace, and truth. The Apostle John, also known as "the Beloved Disciple," wrote that God's love was revealed among us like this: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us ..." (1 John 4:9-10)



Image: Marek Studzinski, Unsplash

- ***What does this passage say about the purpose of Christ's coming?***
- ***How does it change our understanding of love?***

Love calls forth love

A theme that keeps coming up throughout the Bible is that God's love calls forth a response. God's love is received, and then reflected back in our love of God and of our neighbour. "We love because he first

loved us." (1 John 4:19) That's ultimately why we love God and love those around us – because we're responding to our experience of being loved by God. It's this that helps us love our neighbour: those who receive God's love become people who love others. Love isn't merely an emotional thing (how we feel about someone) but concrete action that seeks the other's good.

- ***What does wholehearted love of God, loving God with all our heart, soul and mind, look like in daily life?***
- ***How does God's love shape the way we treat others?***

St Augustine argued that much of the Christian life is about rightly ordered love – that is, loving God first, and then loving everything else after God. There are many good things in love (and yes, some that aren't good) and we go wrong when we love good but lesser things more than the highest good, who is God.

- ***What competes for our deepest love?***
- ***How might Advent help us re-order our loves so we learn to love God first and other people and other things after God?***

Love within the Christian community

As we might expect, there's a lot in the New Testament about how Christian community should work, and how Christians should treat one another. (There's also quite a bit about how Christian community in the early church didn't work as it should – I don't know whether I find that depressing or comforting, that those early Christian communities clearly had some of the issues as churches today.) In his last meal with his disciples before he was arrested Jesus gave them "a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)



Image: Jon Tyson, Unsplash

The thing that distinguishes those who are followers of Jesus from those who aren't is the quality of their relationships, the way they love one another. (Does anyone else find this daunting?)

> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
>
> (Colossians 3:12-14)

There's a healthy realism about this passage from the Letter to the Colossians: it's clear that things didn't always go well. Patience was necessary sometimes, there were complaints, people did behave badly and need forgiving. Just like communities we've been part of. And yet there's the appeal to love, which can lead to harmony. "Clothe yourselves with love" is at heart a baptismal image. Earlier in the chapter the Colossians are reminded "you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self" (Colossians 3:9-10). This echoes the early Christian baptismal rite, in which candidates removed their old clothing and were clothed with a new garment after baptism. By the fourth century, newly baptised Christians commonly received a white robe as a sign of their new life in Christ – incidentally that's the original of the alb, the white robe that clergy and liturgists wear.



Image: Haryo Setyadi, Unsplash

So "clothe yourselves with love" isn't simply a call to feel loving. It's a call to live out the new identity already given in baptism. Just as clothing is the outward thing people notice, love is to be the visible characteristic of the Christian community.

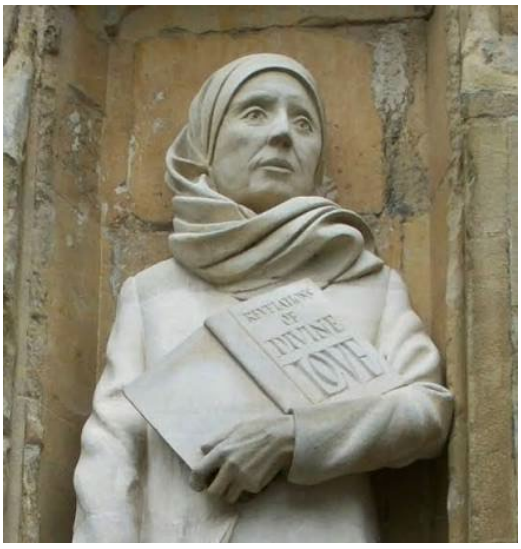
- ***What makes Christian love distinctive?***

- ***How does love create and sustain Christian community?***
- ***What gets in the way of clothing ourselves with love, especially towards difficult people?***
- ***If Christians have "clothed themselves with Christ," what might it look like during this Advent season to "clothe yourselves with love" so that Christ's presence becomes visible to others?***

Love gives hope

Because God's love is steadfast, Christians can wait with confidence for Christ's coming kingdom. The coming of Christ into our world addresses humanity's deepest fears. This is a recurring theme in the Advent and Christmas readings: Mary is told, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:30), as are the shepherds when Jesus' birth is announced to them by the angels (Luke 2:10). The Apostle John wrote to his community that "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Whatever happens, nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:38-39), and so this gives us hope for the future as well as the present.

Julian of Norwich, a mediaeval mystic, was a profound witness to God's unfailing love and compassion. Writing during plague, political instability, and personal suffering, she nevertheless presents a remarkably hopeful vision centred on God's love. Her famous assurance, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," isn't naïve optimism but a firm confidence in God's ultimate purpose.



- ***How does God's love sustain hope?***
- ***What difference does God's love make when we face uncertainty about the future?***
- ***What fears might be transformed by a deeper confidence in God's love?***

Love welcomes the stranger

One of the striking features of the Advent story is that God's love is directed well beyond those who might've been expected to receive it. The birth narratives repeatedly draw outsiders into the story of salvation: Mary's a young woman from an obscure village, the shepherds are out on the margins of respectable society, the magi are foreigners from distant lands. The coming of Christ reveals a God whose love reaches beyond familiar boundaries, a God who comes among ordinary people, outsiders, and those on the margins.

For Christians, receiving God's welcome creates a responsibility to extend welcome to others. Love is not only directed towards family, friends, or those who are easy to love. It reaches outward towards the newcomer, the outsider, the lonely, and the person who seems different from us. Advent invites us not only to rejoice in being loved by God but also to extend hospitality and care to others.

And hospitality as an expression of love is something we find throughout Christian history. Christian communities have often understood welcoming strangers, pilgrims, refugees, and the poor as a practical expression of God's love. The Rule of St Benedict in particular directs monasteries to receive guests as though they were Christ himself. As God has welcomed us, we're called to extend that same love and welcome to others, especially those on the margins.



Image: Nick Fewings, Unsplash

- ***How have you experienced welcome from others, or from God?***
- ***Who are the "strangers" or outsiders in our community today?***

- ***What might it mean to receive others as Christ has received us?***

I am a human being who was loved by God before I was born and whom God will love after I die. This brief lifetime is my opportunity to receive love, deepen love, grow in love, and give love. When I die love continues to be active, and from full communion with God I am present by love to those I leave behind.

Henri Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit*

- ***How has this Advent Study prepared you to welcome Christ – as the baby in Bethlehem, and as the One who will come again at the end of time?***

To finish – some prayers:

Eternal God,
light of the minds that know you,
joy of the hearts that love you,
strength of the wills that serve you;
grant us so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may gladly serve you,
now and always. **Amen.**

Make us glad we pray you, gentle God,
to give each other your loving care;
make us happy to receive it.
May there daily grow within us
a generous, trusting spirit.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS